



Ms Ramani and Prof Mohan are inspired by Singaporeans forging their own path, like fashion designers and civil society activists. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

## Time for grand narratives over

**Prof Mahdev Mohan, 32**  
 Assistant professor of law at  
 Singapore Management University

**His wife Vinita Ramani, 34**  
 Writer and editor

TWO recent changes that spoke to Prof Mahdev Mohan were the setting up of a task force on human trafficking and changes to the mandatory death penalty.

He welcomed them as signals that Singapore is trying to align local laws with international practice.

He and his wife Vinita Ramani run Access to Justice Asia, a human rights consultancy which they set up in 2008.

He adds: "I'm hoping that part of the message is: 'We are making these changes not just to look better but also because we sincerely believe that you are ready, and if you are collectively saying that this needs to be done, we are going to do it.'"

Prof Mohan feels the biggest contribution the Government can make is to erase the stigma attached to being involved in civil society.

"By branding human rights people as fanatics, or considering certain types of NGOs politically motivated, this has had a chilling effect on Singaporeans who have no political agenda whatsoever," he says.

Last year, the former commercial litigator with Drew and Napier

led a team of lawyers to represent Khmer Rouge victims pro bono in a United Nations-backed tribunal.

It was the first time Singaporean lawyers had been involved in an international war crimes trial.

Ms Ramani shares his hope that civil society will be given space to try out ideas, "let them fail, let them pick themselves up, figure out what model works".

The couple are also inspired by Singaporeans who are forging their own path, from founders of indie bookstores to fashion designers and fellow civil society activists.

Ms Ramani says: "Hats off to them. It gives me a sense of hope for the future because they are creating community and creative spirit."

They believe that the time for grand national narratives has passed.

The key to forging a national spirit now is to let Singaporeans be themselves.

Prof Mohan says: "You talk about narratives only if you're trying to construct something. Why contrive in that way?"

For this National Day Rally, instead of giving a pep talk and presenting a grand vision, he thinks it would be much better for the speakers to present ideas for various sectors in society, then step back and "start trusting that people can live up to it".

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